

From Meritocracy to Monopoly: Unveiling Education's Role in Reinforcing Social Inequality

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AUTHOR BIO

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ABSTRACT

While the commonly accepted notion of education functions as a tool for equality, multiple historical and contemporary instances reveal that it indeed has frequently reinforced social hierarchies rather than erasing them. Dating back to the Medieval era, when educational access was controlled by the Church and nobility, and to the Renaissance, shaped by elite humanists, educational access remained exclusive to privileged groups. This pattern also manifests in modern contexts, particularly in the United States, where the rise of charter schools and neoliberal policies further commodified education. Later waves of institutional privatization and market-driven incentives disproportionately benefit the wealthy while marginalizing underprivileged communities. Addressing the rising waves of inequities requires a shift of perspective from treating education as a commodity to viewing it as a public good through reinvestment in public education, equitable resource allocation, and promoting inclusive student-staff partnerships. This paper reexamines the perception of education as a meritocratic equalizer, highlights its role in reinforcing elite privilege, and concludes by calling for systematic reform to achieve accurate educational equity.

Keywords: *education, equality, meritocracy, social hierarchies, privatization, reformation, humanism, neoliberalism, social theory*

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EDUCATION'S HISTORICAL CONTINUUM OF INEQUALITY

In the Middle Ages, the formation of the educational system was closely tied to the teachings of the Church, based on the triad of Christianity, Ancient Greek Culture, and Roman Philosophy (Rentzi, 2021). Thus, education was accessible mainly to the clergy and a select few from the nobility, reinforcing the social hierarchies and limiting intellectual growth to a narrow segment of society (Willinsky, 2019). During the Renaissance, the purpose of education shifted from training clergy to cultivating virtuous and versatile citizens. Humanism broadened the curriculum beyond theology to include classical literature, philosophy, history, and other secular subjects (Yáñez, 2021). However, access to such learning remained highly exclusive, as mastery of Latin and Greek created steep barriers for ordinary people. Instruction was delivered mainly through private instructors employed by royal courts, nobles, and wealthy merchant families (Yáñez, 2021). Although public teachers and schools existed, they were far too limited to reach the broader population, making education an instrument of cultural distinction and class privilege (Black, 1991).

As Black alluded to in the continuing controversies over educational access, given that the powerful ruling bodies were concentrated in major cities, the smaller towns did not receive the same level of resources and attention to train future apprentices. Thus, those in power remained the primary decision-makers in public policy that lacked representation of the underprivileged, whose communal school education only taught them how to follow and be obedient to the elites. This trend of uneven distribution of educational resources becomes more prevalent in modern-day middle and high school systems in the United States. Early examples include Harvard's modeling of

European universities, strict language and curriculum requirements, and its service mainly to the elite. The American education system, while rooted in European traditions, developed its own innovations (McMurtrie, 2006). It became more accessible through early compulsory education, emphasized practical knowledge relevant to society and the economy, and adopted a decentralized structure managed by states and local communities. Intellectually, it inherited European humanism and religious ethics. However, these reforms were limited: educational opportunities remained unevenly distributed, and social class, along with complex racial factors, continued to shape access and outcomes (Donnelly, 2021).

In my research, I aim to provide a more comprehensive analysis of the persistent trend in education inequality through the lens of social theory and modern pedagogy, while offering practical solutions to address this concern. From the perspectives of a sociological framework and public policy, I believe that studying pre-college education resources serves as a better measure of the foundational factors that lead to modern-day education inequality issues, as students who choose to attend college are already more motivated, thereby creating a potential selection bias.

CLASS SOLIDIFICATION THROUGH SOCIAL REPRODUCTION THEORY

Compared to the long-established European education system, which is rooted in a more conservative and static curriculum with a fixed target audience, the American education system, which seeks to offer accessible education for all, has not yet achieved absolute equality either. Similar to its European predecessors, the earliest form of education for children originated in the New England region, to teach religious content, as the major demographic groups were Puritans and

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Congregationalists (Thattai, 2001). It was not until the passage of the Declaration of Independence that Jefferson proposed making education accessible to all and placing it under government control. However, the specific responsibilities of designing the curriculum and allocating resources still fall in the hands of the local state government, as the public educational system is heavily dependent on state taxes. Under such a decentralized system, the federal committee had to step in and pass the National Defense Education Act of 1958 to increase education accessibility for poor or disadvantaged students and require national adherence to an educational equality standard (Thattai, 2001).

Despite efforts at the federal level, underlying structural factors persist in hindering progress toward achieving educational equality for all. Factors such as students' social and economic backgrounds could have a direct impact on their access to education and the overall effort to achieve unified equality. The social reproduction theory in the educational system describes the phenomenon in which pre-existing social status qualities are replicated across generations. As the founder of this theory, cultural theorist Pierre Bourdieu defined the social class as the "interplay and operation of various forms of capital, within the set of durable and objective relations in which the class's subject is located" (DeLuca & Andrews, 2016). Bourdieu's definition of capital is categorized into financial, social, and educational capital that become the determining force of access to foundational education, according to the research titled "Social Reproduction in K-12: Life-long Effects on Middle-class Students" (Guo et al., 2021).

By focusing on the middle class, which is already slightly more privileged than the regular working class, the strategic use of all three capitals determines the amount of educational resources available for later

generations. Thus, social reproduction theory serves as the framework for unraveling the persistent nature of social inequality that results from student engagement with school systems and teaching (Reichelt et al., 2019). Given that American public school funding for primary and secondary education comes from state and local governments that rely on the tax-paying capability of the corresponding residential community. The financial capital in this case directly impacts the quality of the school system, given the local taxpayers' capabilities, as those with more funding can offer students more resources and hire better teachers to prepare them for college readiness (Chingos & Blagg, 2017). The school's financial capital is a direct force that can widen or narrow the gaps between different public schools, as it creates an inherent ranking system to determine proper funding allocation. The subsequent impact of financial resources persists in higher education institutions, like college settings. Michelle Jackson and Brian Holzman traced the historical development of the impact of income inequality and college completion disparities through an "income inequality hypothesis." The study contains an extensive amount of data on income level and US college performance based on birth cohorts from 1908 to 1955 (Jackson & Holzman, 2020). While income may not be the only factor, this study established a positive correlation between the level of income inequality and college access, replicating its impact across time.

The second element is the social factor that categorizes students based on their parents' social circle or the demographics of their school district. In other words, students tend to form long-term friendships with those who have a similar social status to their families (Guo et al., 2021). Over time, the formation of such friend groups will become increasingly exclusive, and resource concentration will further be limited to specific groups, as opposed to sharing with

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outsiders who fail to provide mutual benefits or an equal feedback loop. A research study that centers specifically on US K-12 education by Noras Gordon and Sarah Reber points out that in the past era, the selective placement process in schools was heavily dependent on predetermined traits that inherently create inequality, like racial ethnicity, economic status, and inherent disability. The fundamental shortcoming of the public school system is more of an interdependent structural problem that overrelies on governmental funding, which overlooks the true purpose of education to provide universal academic enrichment on an equal playing field. In other words, from the perspective of public funding, rather than focusing the approach on funding distribution based on a high-level and short-term stimulus, more attention and resources should be dedicated to staff quality, curriculum robustness, and readiness for standardized tests (Gordon & Reber, 2021).

THE CRITICAL PEDAGOGY OF EDUCATION

The founding principle of providing equally accessible forms of education is to prepare students to become responsible citizens of society by teaching them proper values of social governance (Uddin, 2019). Starting from the 21st century, a series of measures emerged to evaluate teachers' effectiveness in teaching through standardized tests, which introduced a lack of motivation to teach students the true founding philosophies of education, as results were measured purely by a score and completion-based. The emphasis on intellectual critical thinking skills first emerged in the Frankfurt School as Critical Theory, amid the dominance of governmental power and cultural hegemony. The concept of Critical Pedagogy, stemming from Critical Theory, aims to address intellectual oppression by teaching students how to assert their voice and challenge the structural enforcement of social dominance (Uddin, 2019).

Thus, education becomes a tool that can equip students with the potential to develop critical thinking capabilities, enabling them to make positive changes and foster a rise in consciousness.

Rather than memorizing content from the professor or textbook, the ability to challenge or debate on specific topics can enhance a student's social consciousness and help them learn to raise their voice in a more practical setting. However, the extent to which such forms of critical pedagogy can be implemented in classrooms is heavily dependent on the teacher and whether they decide to stick to the status quo, such as strictly following the curriculum given to them, or take a more creative approach to step out of the box. This ultimately circles back to the question of receiving adequate school funding to support proper educational infrastructure (Chingos & Blagg, 2017). For families that have a wealthier background, they are more likely to afford housing in school districts with a high tax rate that translates to a better educational system, as the town will have a better ability to attract instructors who are more likely to teach advanced topics that prompt critical thinking skills (Guo et al., 2021).

Another reason for the increased likelihood of acquiring advanced skills in the selected school institutions is the educational factor that the social reproduction theory encompasses. Although the use of school tracking is not used in the American public school systems, the process of separating students into different levels of schooling based on their intellectual performance "has more complex effects on social reproduction than previously assumed, operating through education but also through direct effects of social origin" (Reichelt et al, 2019). The root cause of generational inequality in access to education largely remains in inheritance and the

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growing environment that students experience since childhood. Rather than attributing the exacerbation of inequality to school tracking or segregation, the study concludes that parental determinants may play a significant role.

PRIVATIZATION OF EDUCATION

When debates centered on the vulnerable situations of students and disadvantaged families in choosing the type of school system to attend, many other forms of privatizing schools to offer more voluntary choices began to emerge in modern-day K-12 education in the United States. The process of privatization undermines the impact of any local or public funding that the public school system receives. It almost functions like a form of liberation, “where agents are freed from government regulations, or as ‘marketization’ – where new markets are created as alternatives to government services or state allocation systems” (Adamson & Galloway, 2019). The rationale for this recent trend is primarily driven by more equitable access to quality schools for those who are willing to make sacrifices or afford them, an incentive for better school improvement with more targeted beneficiaries, and, lastly, higher academic achievement levels.

A standard method already utilized by thirty-five states is a form of voucher program called the Educational Savings Accounts (ESAs)—the newest type of voucher approach—available to all or most families who opt for private schools (Suitts, 2024). While this new policy seems to be supporting the disadvantaged students who need additional forms of special education, it also benefits the already wealthy families who can afford to send their children to more prestigious private schools. Another flaw in the voucher system is that it dilutes the already scarce federal education funding away from public schools, thereby creating a wider gap. A universal public

education is still much needed to maintain an orderly structure and build a standard knowledge base.

CONCLUSION

This paper aims to demonstrate the historical continuity of educational inequality in the American pre-college public education system by examining the root cause and origin of education, dating back to the Medieval period. Through a thorough historical analysis, patterns and significant turning points were examined to explore how they have replicated in modern-day American society. The evolution of education’s meaning from the medieval period to the Renaissance, the later aristocratic and mercantilist eras, and ultimately the neoliberal ideologies of the 20th century, illustrates the inevitable nature of knowledge transfer and growing power dynamics. Education has remained a tool to perpetuate privilege rather than being spread equally across the social hierarchy in modern times.

Despite the development of a comprehensive public education system in the United States, structural inequalities remain embedded within it. To explain the causes and consequences that permeate the entire system, this paper applies theoretical frameworks such as Social Reproduction and critical pedagogy in education. The funding of the local school system relies heavily on taxpayers within specific districts, which has led to misaligned resource distribution and unequal access to education, resulting in long-lasting impacts on later high-level educational achievements. Besides, more specialized schools funded by private institutions further exacerbated the already widening educational gap. Not only were federal benefits not covering the expenses of disadvantaged students who chose to enroll in specialized private schools, but the already wealthy families also gained additional benefits

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for attending private schools. Although seeking advanced education emphasizing critical thinking and problem-solving is not inherently problematic for wealthy families, this trend underscores the persistence of social immobility, concentrating resources in elite hierarchies and incentivizing top-performing teachers to work in higher-paying private institutions.

While not having the financial capital to attend private schools does not hinder or terminate access to more intellectually stimulating education, both federal and local policymakers should be more strategic in providing opportunities to thought-provoking students through funded programs or non-profit engagements that all public schools have access to. Rather than focusing on overall funding proposals, more granular improvements can better promote equity in modern education. Addressing these structural shortcomings requires systematic enforcement, proper implementation, and long-term sustainability.

Future research can further explore specific demographic disparities across states by utilizing advanced data analysis to provide more meaningful and relevant comparisons. Another approach is to examine specific public policies in detail by studying their impacts and the underlying social patterns, providing evidence-based, policy-driven recommendations.

PROPOSED SOLUTION

Across these significant periods, the idea and increasing focus on educational equality took place during time periods when the shaping of human rights and civil governance as a responsible citizen gained attention. As policy debates focus on topics such as desegregation in schools and resource distribution, education has become the foundational tool and production house for spreading the appropriate concepts of

citizenship and mobility, to offer each social hierarchy an equal starting point. In modern-day American society, the pursuit of educational equality has garnered unprecedented attention as the country becomes increasingly globalized and diversified, with diverse cultural and ethnic groups. Building on the founding principle of a democracy that is a “land of opportunities,” maintaining an equally accessible venue of educational knowledge serves as a pathway to prosperity rather than an imposing mechanism that enforces exclusion and perpetuates social stratification and concentration of privilege in certain dominant groups. As more tools and resources become available in contemporary society, both the federal government and the school levels have more options to design the public education system to achieve their goals.

One of the most effective solutions to educational inequality is reinvesting in public education to make the ruling power aware of the actual needs. This includes active dialogues between public school systems, including parents, students, and key policymakers, to ensure equal educational opportunities. Methods like providing after-school resources to those school districts with special needs and offering financial aid for students from marginalized backgrounds applying to private schools. This way, it prevents excluding vulnerable student groups from reaching their true potential. First of all, investing in a widely accessible public education can stimulate economic development, as it provides the opportunity and equips all students, regardless of their socioeconomic background, with the skills and foundational knowledge to be responsible participants in an evolving labor market. In the long term, such measures to foster equal access to education not only support social cohesion and strengthen the broader social fabric but also foster a more equitable society. Having a uniform belief in education serves as a critical driver for sustainable economic growth, rather than a tool

to exert power, and promotes overall societal well-being.

In addition to that, Balan proposed ways like "another solution is to foster student-staff partnerships that create safe spaces for dialogue in higher education and center the voices and experiences of marginalized communities. For instance, Memon and Jivraj provide examples of initiatives, such as student-led reading groups and staff-student committees, which have been effective in decolonizing the curriculum and creating a more inclusive educational environment" (Raza Memon & Jivraj, 2020). Through methods that encourage students to step out of their comfort zones by expressing genuine thoughts to their instructors, a mutually beneficial loop is created, allowing for further improvements in the educational sphere. The shift towards a more humanistic approach to education may be necessary to ensure high-quality services and address the broader social and political issues affecting various professions. While the increasing use of artificial intelligence may dilute the overall quality and connotation of education, it is a relatively inexpensive resource that is widely accessible to students who lack exposure to robust instructional resources.

Rather than attaching a monetary value to education as a tool for economic prosperity, viewing it as a mechanism for social justice empowerment and civic engagement can create lasting benefits. Making education a widely accessible public resource, policymakers should ensure uniform learning opportunities across various socioeconomic regions while incorporating collaboration from non-profit organizations. To gain greater support and influence, public-wide efforts like advocacy movements, public campaigns, and community-driven initiatives can all play a crucial role in achieving this goal. Most importantly, all participants must adhere to the

democratic principles of fairness, opportunity, and social mobility. Reform measures should prioritize equality for the greater good to create a more inclusive education system.

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